

Echoes of a Golden Age: The Representation of Arabian Civilization in Naguib Mahfouz's The Journey of Ibn Fattouma

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Abstract:

Emphasizing how the book portrays the complexity of Arab identity and culture through an allegorical voyage, this study critically investigates how Arabian civilization is portrayed in Naguib Mahfouz's *The Voyage of Ibn Fattouma*. The novel centres on Ibn Fattouma. A young man, his path across several fictitious civilizations reflects the historical development of Arabian culture and its changing interactions with modernism, tradition, and outside influences. Using the protagonist's journey, Mahfouz questions the idealization of former civilizations—especially the so-called "golden age" of Arabian culture—while simultaneously exploring the difficulties of modern Arab nations. The study looks at the symbols, metaphors, and cultural allusions Mahfouz used to craft a story challenging the idea of a single Arab identity and the demands it encounters in contemporary society. The study also examines Mahfouz's subdued critique of modern society concerns and historical romanticism. Ibn Fattouma journey reflects the Arab world's post-colonial struggle to reconcile its past with modernity. This study clarifies the several representations of Arabian civilization in Mahfouz's works and their relevance in modern literary and cultural debate using this examination. Finally, this study provides a thorough analysis of *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* as a critical book that reflects the inconsistencies in the portrayal of Arabian civilization and provides a great understanding of the continuous intellectual and cultural discussions inside the Arab world.

Keywords: Arabian civilization, Naguib Mahfouz, Ibn Fattouma, allegory, golden age.

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أصداء العصر الذهبي: تصوير الحضارة العربية في رحلة ابن فطومة نجيب محفوظ

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الملخص:

من خلال التركيز على كيفية تصوير الرواية لتعقيدات الهوية والثقافة العربية عبر رحلة رمزية، يتناول هذا البحث بشكل نقدي كيفية تصوير الحضارة العربية في رواية نجيب محفوظ *رحلة ابن فطومة*. تدور الرواية حول شخصية ابن فطومة، وهو شاب تعكس رحلته عبر عدة حضارات خيالية التطور التاريخي للثقافة العربية وتفاعلها المتغير مع الحداثة والتقاليد والتأثيرات الخارجية. ومن خلال رحلة البطل، يشكك محفوظ في تمجيد الحضارات السابقة، وخاصة ما يُعرف بـ "العصر الذهبي" للحضارة العربية، في الوقت الذي يستكشف فيه أيضاً صعوبات الواقع في الدول العربية الحديثة. يتناول البحث الرموز والاستعارات والإشارات الثقافية التي استخدمها محفوظ لصياغة قصة تتحدى فكرة الهوية العربية الموحدة وما تواجهه من تحديات في المجتمع المعاصر. كما يتناول البحث أيضاً النقد الضمني الذي يقدمه محفوظ لقضايا المجتمع الحديث والرومانسية التاريخية. وتعكس رحلة ابن فطومة صراع العالم العربي في مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار للتوفيق بين ماضيه وحداثته. ومن خلال هذا التحليل، يوضح البحث تجليات الحضارة العربية المختلفة في أعمال محفوظ وأهميتها في النقاشات الأدبية والثقافية المعاصرة. وأخيراً، يقدم هذا البحث تحليلاً شاملاً لرواية *رحلة ابن فطومة* كعمل نقدي يعكس التناقضات في تصوير الحضارة العربية ويساهم في إثراء النقاشات الفكرية والثقافية المستمرة في العالم العربي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحضارة العربية، نجيب محفوظ، ابن فطومة، الرمزية

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1-Introduction

Naguib Mahfouz is one of Egypt's most well-known writers and Nobel laureates, renowned for mixing personal stories with more general society and historical topics. Mahfouz investigates the complexity of Arab identity in *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, a young man searching for knowledge and world understanding. From its golden past to its modern challenges, the book employs allegory to depict a trip through several civilizations, each with unique facets of the Arabian cultural legacy. Using this literary investigation, Mahfouz questions historical romanticism and contemporary disillusionment, effectively expressing the complex links between past and present in Arab civilization.

The problem states that Arabian civilization is sometimes portrayed in literature as being between the idealization of the past and the disappointment of the present. This paradox takes the front stage in Mahfouz's *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*. The protagonist's path represents the search for meaning in a society stuck between modern conflicts and historical nostalgia. However, how the book presents Arabian civilization raises problems about the veracity and consequences of these images. Is Mahfouz's presentation a mirror of Arabian identity, or is it a critique meant

to challenge the idea of a "golden age"? The book answers these issues and investigates how Mahfouz criticizes and reassembles the Arab cultural narrative using literary devices.

- Objectives of the Study:

To analyze the representation of Arabian civilization in *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the symbolic significance of the journey undertaken by the protagonist as an allegory for the Arab world's relationship with its past.

To examine the role of Mahfouz's use of historical and cultural references in creating a critique of both idealized and contemporary representations of Arab identity.

To look at the comments of the book on the tension between modernism and tradition in Arabian society.

This course aims to provide a thorough knowledge of Mahfouz's philosophical viewpoints and method of approaching Arabian civilization in the framework of world literary movements.

- The study's significance

This work adds to the continuous conversation on how Arabian civilization is portrayed in modern literature. Emphasizing *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* offers a complex view of

Mahfouz's work as a mirror of the golden age of Arabian civilization and the sociopolitical difficulties of contemporary Arab society. For academics of Middle Eastern literature, the study results are noteworthy since they provide a more thorough understanding of Mahfouz's multifarious portrayal of Arabian identity. Moreover, it helps place the ideas of the book into the larger framework of Arab intellectual life, so clarifying how literature may both reflect and criticize cultural legacy.

2. Literature review

December 11, 1911, marks the birth of distinguished and well-known Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz. He became somewhat well-known after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. His vast body of work consists of books that explore the personal experience in great detail, frequently showing people struggling with the complex structures and social mores around them. In this sense, he can be aptly considered a philosophical novelist who contemplates the human condition through his narrative lens.

Mahfouz is from a family at a superior social level, which gave him educational possibilities that were not accessible to many of his contemporaries. He studied at King Fuad University's prestigious Faculty of Arts. After his academic career, he was hired by the Ministry of

Religious Affairs and worked for two decades before being named ministry director. However, in 1954, following Egypt's loss in the Suez Canal War, when the sociopolitical environment changed negatively, Mahfouz decided to veer from the bureaucratic route and completely embrace his calling as a novelist.

In the next years, he created an amazing range of works, including 110 books and countless short tales, plays, and scenarios. Mahfouz regularly used neutral Egyptian colloquial language throughout these creative projects, deftly fusing secular ideas with stories based on daily life. Like the complexity of Joyce's "Sound and Fury," Mahfouz deftly captures the core of his native country, enabling him to portray the nuances of the Egyptian experience. Still, he notes as an Arab writer that total neutrality is impossible.

Mahfouz had a horrific incident in 1994 when he was attacked by fundamentalists who stabbed him, which significantly changed his opinion. Following this event, he took a more hostile attitude toward the growing Islamic movements, which led to reaction and criticism from a good number of Arab countries. This ideological struggle over values, particularly regarding capitalism versus fundamentalism, led to Mahfouz, alongside Fareh Hobalel, unfortunately

leaving behind much of their literary contributions.

The late Nobel laureate Mahfouz produced nearly 200 works throughout his lifetime. These have become references of immense value to contemporary Chinese fiction writers thanks to their unique intersections with realistic themes and propositions. Throughout the twentieth century, Mahfouz earned the esteemed title of the dean of Arabic literature, and his diverse literary output, characterized predominantly by novels, achieved high artistic standards and received critical acclaim. While it is impossible to enumerate his notable works here, most showcase a picturesque and engaging prose style that draws from modern and traditional backgrounds.

The literary contributions of this particular ethnic group, which has persisted in the city of Cairo over the past 150 years—Egypt's most significant metropolis—reflect the rich tapestry of cultural and religious life and the customs, historical narratives, economic transformations, and social dynamics. These themes of justice and morality resonate within the realm of literature and the everyday lives of individuals. N. Mahfouz, 1911-2006, stands as a quintessential figure representative of novels emerging from the third world and the Arab world, and he is particularly emblematic of Arabic

narrative literature (María Thomas de Antonio, 2014) (Chafi et al, 2024).

3. Historical and Cultural Context of Arabian Civilization

One may see both the dark threads denoting indisputable truths and the shimmering golden threads symbolizing fascinating myths that have lasted over time in the complex and vibrant tapestry spanning the great distances of world history. Often rising to prominence, these dazzling myths deftly mix with the facts to form a rich and varied fabric of history spun into a highly complex design reflecting great beauty and depth. Particularly within the historical account that has come to be recognized as Arabian culture, this astonishing pattern with its great subtleties repeats itself with startling grace and sophisticated intricacy. (Mohamed et al. 2023). The legendary cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, which has been followed back through an extraordinary lineage that extends seven centuries to the time when the very last contributions were made to the foundational text of the Koran, is found in its final place in the Topkapi Privy Room Museum located in the beautiful city of Istanbul as the twentieth century drew to an end marked by significant events including television, moon landings, drones, and high-technology warfare. This enchanted and cherished garment has developed to represent a potent emblem

of authority and spiritual meaning, covering layers of rich legend and age-old custom. Who could ever prove whether Mohammed had really acquired a succession of such holy objects over his lifetime or whether he genuinely owned such a sacred mantle? Furthermore, the grand narrative of Salah al-Din and the crucial conflict at the Horns of Hattin is another striking example of how the captivating strands of tradition can occasionally obscure factual reality, forming and affecting our view of historical events (Efendi. 2021).

At the Horns of Hattin in 1187, a critical turning point during the rule of Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, the legendary confrontation resulting in the ultimate defeat and capture of the Christian forces occurred.

The first waves of attack during that fatal collision mainly targeted the vital spring- and stream-fed lake, which was the primary source of water for both the Christian and Muslim armies as they suffered what seemed to be an endless succession of sweltering days before the crucial engagement.

Along with the epic and legendary Siege of Acre that spurred the confining of Byzantine, Frankish, Syrian, Maghreb, and Egyptian knighthoods, the entries discovered within the Domesday records of the Fourth Crusade show how tradition, spun with both real exploits and imaginative storytelling,

progressively spun the rich golden threads of history into a pattern that captivates and intrigues.

Many such examples abound throughout the fascinating story of Arabian culture, illuminating this historical account's depth and complexity. Not only is the symbolic seal shown following the Treaty of Versailles, formally ending the First World War, but none other than the celebrated Round Table—dining furniture painstakingly carved from the ancient wood of an Arabian cedar tree, symbolizing unity and shared heritage—as a remarkable introduction to these rich and complex chapters within the fabric of world history. With layers of meaning just waiting to be unearthed and investigated, this complex tapestry has far more than first greets the sight) Alhosani, 2013), Maria Thomas de Antonio (2014).

4 . Themes and Motifs on Ibn Fattouma's Journey

One of the first and most often used narrative motifs in literature, the voyage motif is a potent metaphor for a person's development and transcendental search for meaning and insight. Many authors from many civilizations have applied this idea extensively to carefully organize their artistic creations' stories. Writing about travels became immensely popular because the literary work *Reisebilder* by Mörike was

considered an unparalleled self-portrait of the German poet, motivating many writers to tour the world via their stories (Liang et al, 2023).

However, the trip goes beyond physical travel across varied environments; it must also be seen as a rigorous path towards self-knowledge and personal enlightenment. In this sense, Mahfouz's important work, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, which is written as a very contemplative philosophical parable, masterfully shows the journey of the academic protagonist Ibn Fattouma. Driven by his intense ambition to reconstruct the legendary ancient Golden Age, a period of affluence and cultural diversity, he travels great distances across Arabia (Alruqban, et al. 2024).

From Rihana, tucked away in the far western corner of Arabia, Ibn Fattouma set out on several famous Arab journeys through Al-Kufa, Nishapur, Basra, and Mecca. Before he returns to Arabia, where he explores the major towns of Medina, Nawa, and finally El-Yonder, his adventures eventually bring him as far as the far-off Chinese city of Khanbalik. Fattouma's protracted search is an excellent meditation on self-examining fundamental moral and ethical principles and the complex and multifarious recent changes that have moulded Arabian society.

In this framework, the way the book depicts the search for a condition marked by ideal civic and philosophical life inside a society thought to have fallen from grace becomes a fantastic chronicle of Egypt's society's moral aspirations and challenges. Located between its deep Islamic roots and legendary Arab past on one side and its present state of economic and cultural dependence on the West on the other, this society finds itself in a fragile equilibrium.

Although looking for a lost Golden Age is naturally global and ageless, it becomes more noticeable within the current Arabic historical consciousness framework. In this narrative, the catastrophic decline from past Arabian and Islamic glory is starkly marked by the subordination of the Arabic world to the rapid ascendancy of Europe, which began in earnest from the late 18th century onward (Elsaadany, 2022). Set against contemporary Arabic colonial history, Mahfouz's poignant transposition of the Arabian Golden Age myth encapsulates the deeply contradictory attractions of an idealized pre-colonial past. This past becomes an essential ground for the politics of contemporary Arab resistance, social reform, and the construction of modern nationalism ((Elmeligi, 2023).

Simultaneously, according to María Thomas de Antonio (2014) the novel's

unique narrative form, presented as an ethnographic parable, significantly reinterprets earlier nationalist portrayals of history by offering a vision of a future that remains uncertain yet full of potential for change and renewal.

5- Character Analysis and Symbolism in the Novel

One of the striking points of the novel under review is the abundant number of characters and symbolic events or occurrences. A closer look shows that the author intends to lay bare the articulation of his perceptions mainly through these symbolic aspects. However, he does not content himself with an approach only concerned with symbolism. He seems to be deeply involved in the conflicts between good and evil, which are pregnant with negative implications for the fate of the Arab world. This latter point becomes manifest from the number of positively portrayed characters versus the negatively portrayed ones. With the apparent absence of successful propagation of the former's ideas, the dichotomies that follow in the wake of the stratification process evict acquisitive tendencies that could become common values.

The singular orientation of setting such negative and simplistic tendencies vanquishes any critical intimation that deviates into the sphere of the symbolic, as in how wine is projected as a lethal

tradition. However, this sentimental exhibition does not prevent the development of an understanding that views the clear demarcation of characters represented as belief systems inside the prototypical archetypes. (Stahl, et al. 2024)

To those who believe in the belief system of Ibn Fattouma, characters who have failed or those who have become too fed up with life are actors of negativity facing the challenge for eternity to perfect the system. However, reaching that attainment of the return to the original state before human intentions were tainted, failed characters seem to imply, is not as easy as the words suggest. For as long as the search continues within the consciousness of those capable of alteration within themselves, positive or evil, present or latent, their being good or evil will show (Sarhini et al., 2021) (Hagen, 2022).

6. Critical Reception and Legacy of Naguib Mahfouz's Work

Widely recognized as one of the greatest Arab novelists of his generation, Naguib Mahfouz retained a complex relationship with Western readers. On the one hand, his reputation still rests mainly on the success enjoyed by his great Cairo Trilogy over the past five decades and is widely read by Western Tourists in the Arab world. On the other hand, some of his later works have been neglected or viewed with ambivalence

by those for whom Arabian Nights-inspired tales of community, identity, or decline held little allure. This section examines Mahfouz's varying representation of Arabian civilization and its reception in *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* (Morsy, 2024).

Accordingly, it will be important to try and see how (or indeed whether) this relatively brief tale of one man's quest to find his own Golden Age against a semi-abstracted Arabian setting might be said to anticipate, complicate, or undermine such received ideas of its author. Written in the same year as his tragicomic novel about the history of the world, *There is foreshadowing here of various 'civilizations' along the way (chiefly through differing responses to laughter); it is significant, then, that one 'civilization' which Mahfouz chooses to portray his protagonist as ignoring in his haste for progress and perfectibility is Western, which is depicted throughout as brutal and incapable of understanding or respecting nobler past times (María Thomas de Antonio, 2014). In so doing, Ibn Fattouma's subsequent disillusionment with the civilization of the arches and light, "nothing but fields of flame and ghettos filled with the children of darkness". In his reversion to a more straightforward, nomadic way of life at the novel's end, Mahfouz can even be seen as advocating a return across the Bitter Waters to the purity of*

the pre-Islamic Arabian past (K. Chaubey, 2014).

7. Conclusion:

The Journey of Ibn Fattouma reflects the conflict between idealized pasts and disappointed present utilizing a vigorous literary investigation of Arabian history. Using its allegorical approach, Mahfouz not only challenges the historical romanticism sometimes connected to the golden age of the Arab civilization but also pushes readers to face the complexity of modern Arab identity. This paper has investigated how Mahfouz's work challenges oversimplified conceptions of Arabian civilization and offers a profound contemplation on how cultural narratives change, bridging the past and the present. For this reason, the book still speaks to modern readers since it provides a provocative prism through which to see the continuous challenges and hopes of the Arab world.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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